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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000386

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: RFE/RL'S ROSY VIEW OF THEIR STATUS IN ARMENIA

REF: A. 08 YEREVAN 995
[1](#)B. 08 YEREVAN 813
[1](#)C. 08 YEREVAN 811
[1](#)D. 08 YEREVAN 779
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Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) RFE/RL Prague representative Nenad Pejic traveled to Armenia from May 20-21 to review Radio Liberty's coverage related to Yerevan's May 31 municipal election. Pejic sought feedback from Armenia's political parties and explained to them the election guidelines under which Radio Liberty's reporters are meant to operate. He also met with Presidential Adviser Vigen Sargsian. In his readout to the Embassy, he said that all his interlocutors had provided a positive assessment of Radio Liberty's work and that the President's office had "significantly improved its attitude" toward RFE/RL. He also rebuffed Embassy concerns that RFE/RL Bureau Chief, Agahsi Yenokian, is too closely tied to the Armenian opposition, stating categorically he "has no issue with Yenokian." Based on previous and later comments to us by high-ranking GOAM officials, we believe Pejic's assessment of Radio Liberty's situation in Armenia is overly optimistic.
End Summary.

Parties Have No Problem with Coverage

[1](#)2. (C) From May 20-21, RFE/RL Prague representative Nenad Pejic traveled to Armenia to review Radio Liberty's coverage related to Yerevan's upcoming May 31 Yerevan municipal election. (Note: The visit was precipitated in large part by GOAM concerns that Radio Liberty's coverage of the February 2008 presidential election was biased against President Sargsian and that Bureau Chief, Aghasi Yenokian, is closely linked to the opposition. End Note.). Pejic met with representatives of Armenia's main political parties, providing them with an "Election Alphabet" outlining RFE/RL's standard operating procedures for election coverage, and the opportunity to discuss any concerns they might have about Radio Liberty's reporting of the election. He met with Gagik Beglarian, current Yerevan Mayor and mayoral candidate for the ruling Republican Party; Vahan Hovhannisian from the Dashnaktutian Party (until recently, part of the governing coalition); Artur Baghdassarian from the Rule of Law Party (part of the governing coalition); Aram Safarian from the Prosperous Armenia Party (also in the governing coalition);

and Levon Ter-Petrossian, Armenian National Congress opposition leader and former president.

13. (C) During his meetings, Pejic reported that "literally speaking," all candidates expressed support for RFE/RL broadcasts in Armenia and indicated that Radio Liberty ensured balanced broadcasting. Party members who had expressed previous concerns over bias stated that they believed that the bias had been specifically related to the presidential elections and that the station's reporting had improved significantly." Pejic asserted that "no single example of any false report" was noted and that the only suggestion received during his meetings was offered by Ter-Petrossian, who urged RFE/RL to become the "formal voice of the opposition."

Presidential About-Face?

14. (C) Pejic also met with Vigen Sargsian, Presidential Advisor. (Note: Sargsian has repeatedly criticized RFE/RL for being pro-opposition and has vehemently opposed RFE/RL's choice to hire Yenokian as Bureau Chief. On a previous visit, Sargsian refused to let Yenokian accompany Pejic to the meeting, shouting that Yenokian was "anti-Armenian."). Pejic stated that during this meeting, Sargsian was "exactly the oQite," greeting both of them warmly. Pejic reported Sargsian's body language was "very friendly" and that Sargsian said that any problems with RFE/RL are "a matter of taste." He urged Pejic to keep lines of communication open and did not rule out an interview with President Sargsian. He did however, complain about the order in which stories are broadcast and reminded Pejic to "be careful the next two weeks" with the station's reporting, indicating that "Any

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potential interview with the President would depend on RFE/RL's coverage."

Differing Points of View

15. (C) In a meeting with Pejic at the end of his visit, Ambassador Yovanovitch expressed concern about a May 20 Hayots Ashkhar newspaper article with a photo of Yenokian embracing two opposition leaders at a recent demonstration. The GOAM has complained that Yenokian is still an active member of the opposition, with intimate ties to top ANC leadership. (Note: Sargsian did not mention the article at his meeting with Yenokian and Pejic. End Note.). The Ambassador asked Pejic to once again confirm that Yenokian had severed his ties with the opposition. Pejic categorically stated that Yenokian is an unbiased journalist who has "every right to report on the opposition," complaining to Emboff on the way out that U.S. government officials "do not always understand the role of the media."

16. (C) At the request of the RFE/RL Office of Audience Research, InterMedia commissioned the Yerevan-based organization Armenian Center for Integration and Democratization to conduct a study. The study took place from March 25-28, 2009. Pejic reported positive results, no findings of bias, and high quality programming. (Note: The copy of the report that we received was not quite as glowing and noted a significant number of people in the focus groups commenting on what they perceived as a pro-opposition bias in reporting. End Note.)

Comment: Not Out of the Woods Yet

17. (C) In our past meetings with Pejic, we have noticed a tendency to portray his meetings with government officials in

an overly positive light and gloss over potential warning signs. Over the past several months, DAS Bryza and the Ambassador have continued to receive complaints about Radio Liberty's reporting from Foreign Minister Nalbandian and President Sargsian, who appears to take any negative reporting by RL quite personally. When Ambassador told Nalbandian that she was pleased to hear that the government now approved of how RFE/RL was reporting, the Foreign Minister quickly corrected the record and noted that Pejic,s interlocutors were "playing games"

18. (C) We commend RFE/RL for keeping lines of communication open. However, we do not believe that we have heard the last of the GOAM's complaints, nor do we feel confident that the GOAM will forego efforts in the future to shut RFE/RL down. On the bright side, we were recently told by the station manager of one of the two networks that carries RFE/RL programming that the most sought after advertising slots are just before and just after the Radio Liberty broadcasts.
YOVANOVITCH